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JOURNALISM TEACHING PRACTICE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

The transition to full online teaching format has posed a number of challenges of journalism higher education. The goal of this research is to show Georgian journalism teachers' attitudes towards online learning during the covid-19 pandemic. To reach this goal and explore this issue a social constructivism framework is used.

The main research questions: How effective is this process? What are the strengths and weakness of full online learning? What opportunities of the development are arisen?

This study is based on the qualitative approach and a semi-structured interviews method is used for this research. The interviews (n=17) were conducted among journalism professors, different Georgian media schools. This study was carried out from 20 June till 20 October 2021.

According to the results of this study, there are a lot of challenges facing during the full remote classes but nevertheless there are a number of development opportunities. At the end of the research the author suggests certain recommendations for media schools.

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Introduction.

Covid-19 pandemic poses a lot of global challenges in every sphere worldwide. Education is one of the areas which has faced many difficulties due to sudden changes caused by distance learning.

The transition to full online teaching format has posed a number of challenges of journalism higher education. From early days of pandemic, February 2020, all classes started using remote learning and some innovative ways were used because "higher education institutions worldwide have been pushed to experiment e-learning as the traditional class-based learning is impossible under Covid-19 regulations (Mseleku, 2020, Demuyakor, 2020; et al).

Zoom has become one of the most widely used innovative pedagogical platforms. As well as other alternative platforms like Google Meet, Microsoft Team, Webex etc. According to Grandinetti and Warren, 90% of U.S. Universities used Zoom platform from the beginning of pandemics (Grandinetti, 2020; Warren, 2020). As other US authors pointed out "faculty and students across the world were largely forced into Zoom-based online learning in lieu of face-to-face pedagogy" (Atkins, A., Charles, F., & Adjanin, N. 2020).

Georgian media educators also started using the innovative pedagogical approaches. Some of them used Google Meet, some of them - Zoom and they also used Microsoft Teams. There were a lot of challenges during online learning but of course they tried to solve these challenges.

The goal of this research is to show Georgian journalism teachers' attitudes towards online learning during the covid-19 pandemic. For reaching this goal and exploring this issue a social constructivism framework is used.

Literature Review.

There are a number of the studies in different disciplines, how they started using innovative approaches because of pandemics, "most studies conducted on the impact of Covid-19 and national lockdown address how higher education institutions responded" (Mseleku, 2020).

Professors of journalism and communications from different countries also published some studies where they described their experience while the pandemic learning. As it appears from literature review, some countries were more prepared for compulsory distance learning, because they had experience to use distance learning in some subject courses.

As Arab authors emphasized, "Covid-19 pandemic has pushed the world's educational institutions towards sudden changes; while some countries were technically and logistically prepared, others were not, due to the gap existing between countries that adopt information and communication technology (ICT), and those that are unable to integrate it into their educational establishments (Al-Mutairi et. al. 2021).

Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the adaptation of E-learning tools fully, students as well journalism educators adopted a 'new normal' pedagogy of learning (Matsilele, 2020; Misimanga et al. 2022).

Thus, most of the studies tried to show the challenges which journalism educators or students in different countries faced.

Dotsenko when explored Ukrainian case while pandemic and journalism higher education pointed out that Google class room was actively used by teachers and she emphasized that professors of practical courses started working online 24 hours and 7 days (Dotsenko, 2020).

Markos Mayo-Gubero described during covid-19 case study of innovative teaching experience TV journalism in Spain via Moodle platform (Mayo-Cubero, M. 2021). As it is emphasized by author, blended e-learning Moodle portal improved students TV writing skills.

Most of the studies described the main challenges which were media educators faced in various countries (Fowler-Watt et. all, 2020; Friesem, 2020; Olsen, 2022; Snoussi, et al. 2020; Tejedor, et al. 2021; Grabelnikov et. al, 2020; Poluektova et. al, 2020).

Friesem after analyzing 16 media educators' interviews and focus groups in Columbia College Chicago (USA) who teach media production classes, concludes that "the challenges for media educators during the remote instruction ranges from issues of digital divide, such as disparities in physical access, use of media, motivations to be engaged in the class, and the benefits of being part of what became an online community of learners" (Friesem, 2020).

Fowler-Watt Karen and her co-authors from the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University in the UK, present their reflection about the challenges of higher journalism education in the UK. As they conclude: "The challenges of upholding industry standards and delivering professional skills are being met in a context where these standards are constantly shifting due to the 'new normal' of social distancing, changed newsroom environments and a renewed focus on journalism's civic role. Similarly, the development of a "pedagogy of compassion" constitutes a pragmatic response" (Fowler-Watt, K. et. all, 2020).

As for Georgian context, distance learning has never been used in journalism education before the covid-19 pandemic apart the limited experience with blended learning based on the Moodle platform (Osepashvili, 2011). It's worth mentioning that there are studies which analyzed social media usage during the higher journalism education (Osepashvili, 2014) and its role as a communication function (Gersamia & Toradze, 2017).

This is the first research in Georgia which studied teaching practice of media educators during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, its novelty is not in doubt. The practical result of this study is the recommendations which appeared after the analyzing 17 interviews.

Methods.

The main research questions:

RQ.1. How effective is this process?

RQ.2. What are the strengths and weakness of full online learning?

RQ.3. What opportunities of development are arisen?

This study is based on the qualitative approach and a semi-structured interviews method is used for this research. The interviews (n=17) were conducted among journalism professors, different Georgian media schools. On the whole, 12 Georgian university professors participated.

This study was carried out from 20 June till 20 October 2021. It was the time when the first wave of pandemic ended and some universities decided to use a hybrid model of learning – some students stayed online and some students returned back to classes.

Main Findings and Discussions.

Challenges.

According to the questioned media educators, there were a lot of challenges during online learning but of course they tried to solve these challenges. Before pandemic, some of them had little experience while using e-learning portal at Moodle-platform.

Most of the interviewed professors mentioned, the first challenge was transition to the innovative online platforms – zoom, google meet, e-learning portals etc. However, it was not difficult and they easily managed to use new technologies for the “new normality” or “new reality”.

“Now it is more comfortable. At the early stage of lockdowns when we moved to online process it was more difficult. Even though I had experience in teaching online, I still found it difficult...”

“The first time was difficult because using new platforms was stressful emotionally. I was afraid that students could not join me or they could not hear my voice... Then I got used to it’

Every day they had approximately 4 hours for distance lectures and practical works but actually they spent more time, especially for practical courses, like TV or print production classes.

Zoom is the most popular but it had a problem because most of the educators in Georgia used a free Zoom application which allowed only 40 minutes session and then they needed to apply again.

“What we call online or distance learning was more a crisis learning to which we went unprepared without a concept, without knowing the specifics of such learning. It could be said that we were teaching and learning how to teach online.”

The technical challenges were also related to the internet connection. As it was mentioned by questioned professors, it was also a disturbing factor in learning processes, especially at the early time of pandemic:

„Sometimes I couldn't understand when the internet connection was interrupted and it often turned out that I was still talking and no one could hear me...”

„I've had a lecture crash because the power or internet connection stopped and then I tried to restore the lecture, re-record it and upload it for the students...”

The next challenge was related to the assessment methods. As it was emphasized by many professors, they had to change the assessment component in theoretical courses - instead of tests on the midterms and final exams, they were offered to write essays showing their ability of critically analyze.

“Most of my colleges and me have changed quizzes by essays but grading students during the weekly seminars is still very difficult because most of the students have their cameras off and I have a feeling that they can read the material properly from books or readers”

The main challenge was for practical courses, like Tv or Radio production. But this challenge was adopted as an innovation - most of the professors started using mobile phones during the online classes instead of video cameras;

“We asked the students to use mobile phones instead of TV cameras in order to take a video. It seems like a simple technology but adaption was not so easy in the conditions of distance...”

“The transition to remote learning was not comfortable for practical journalism courses but under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no other option. The difficulty was mostly related to the practical part such as shooting or editing via a mobile phone, etc.”

One of the main challenges for teachers was the lack of communication. For them it was an inconvenience that most of the students had their cameras turned off during the lectures and the fact that they could not see their faces was also one more inconvenience.

“It is a very serious problem when students turn off their camera and I don't know whom I speak to...”

“I have a feeling that I am on one side of the curtain and they are on in other side. This reduces social interaction which is one of the main challenges for me”

Internships and industry experience are integral parts of practice-orientated journalism programs worldwide. Unfortunately, the pandemic time closed opportunities for students to be involved in practical journalistic experience because some media organizations worked online. Thus, internship was also a challenge, especially in early lockdown time.

Strengths of distance learning.

As it was revealed by these interviews, online learning has some certain strengths: It saves money and time. Teachers and students don't waste time on transport to get to university.

"I didn't spend money for petrol in order to go to the university and it was a benefit for me and not only for me..."

"Neither me nor my students wasted time on transport. So, this kind of teaching saves our energy as well..."

Most teachers emphasized that, it is useful for students in the sense that if they are unable to attend online lectures, they can view the lecture transcript at any time.

"In my opinion, the strongest point of online learning is that it responds to individual requirements, which means the following: the student has the opportunity to adapt the learning/teaching process to an individual rhythm, which he or she cannot do in the classroom, no matter how hard the lecturer tries to introduce an individual approach. As for the lecturers, I think that online learning made them more organized and pushed them to introduce innovations..."

As it was revealed by this research, new communication skills were developed by distance learning and this is one the most strengths of during teaching/learning pandemic time.

It's worth mentioning that as most teachers of practical courses pointed out, recording interviews in a new normality, was a new useful skill.

"Students learn new approaches, develop new skills of communication and listen to each other..."

"Also, besides new learning and communication skills, they acquire new knowledge and skills in their profession, for example, recording interviews with various online platforms".

Opportunity of development.

As for the opportunity of development, most professors think that distance learning has a great potential of development.

"In my opinion, online learning contributes to the professional development of the lecturers as it encourages them to constantly look for something new to interest the audience and forces students to acquire the skills to work independently. Online learning encourages everyone to adopt new technologies!"

It's worth mentioning that it reduces the geographical space and students can get education at any time from any place.

"A person does not depend on the geographical area to get the desired education in the desired environment".

Most of the teachers pointed out that remote learning is a future of universities.

"I think, distance learning is a future. Step by step, almost all components of the educational process should be adapted to this system. Face-to-face communication is very important for social relations, but online learning makes education more accessible to all groups..."

Some journalism school professors think that once they return to the auditorium, it will not be bad if they leave the hybrid model in some theoretical course. Especially at the graduate level, because it saves time for both lecturers and students.

It should also be emphasized that when the most questioned media educators were asked which subject courses could be added to journalism schools curricula what knowledge Georgian journalists lack, they pointed out that as the pandemic has emerged, it is necessary to teach the skills of scientific journalism, trauma journalism and digital literacy in order to strengthen critical thinking.

Conclusions and recommendations.

To sum up, as it was revealed by this qualitative research, during covid-2019 pandemic, it was not a full remote learning. It was a teaching during crisis time. Georgian media educators were faced to

some challenges but they tried to solve most of these challenges and turn them into possibilities which is important for the future development of distance learning.

According to this study some recommendations appeared for journalism schools:

- It would be desirable in the post-pandemic era, to maintain a hybrid model and use distance learning in some theoretical courses;
- It would be desirable from time to time to train professors in the new educational technologies;
- It would be desirable to add such courses, health journalism; trauma journalism; science journalism and mobile journalism to the curricula.
- It would be also desirable to add digital literacy to the curricula in order to strengthen critical thinking.

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Appendix 1

Questions for Semi-structured interviews:

1. Which platforms do you use during the teaching processes?

- a) Google Meet
- b) Zoom
- c) Microsoft Teams
- d) e-learning portal
- e) etc.

Note: You can choose several answers

2. Approximately, how many hours a day do you spend on online lectures?

- a) 4
- b) 2
- c) 6
- d) 8
- e) etc.

3. In your opinion, how effective is online learning?

4. In your opinion, what strengths does online learning have?

- a) It saves the time
- b) it's possible to join the network and attend lectures from any place
- c) etc.

5. In your opinion, what disadvantages does online learning have?

- a) lack of interaction
- b) technical problems
- c) it's not effective teaching for practical courses
- d) it's difficult to be concentrate your attention fully
- e) the assessment of students is difficult
- f) it's tiring
- g) etc.

6. Did you have to change assessment system in your courses while e-learning process?

7. Would you like to use distance learning even after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic?

- a) It depends on which study course it will be
- b) Not fully
- c) only in theoretical courses
- d) in some practical courses

- e) I would not want it at all
- f) etc.

8. How comfortable are you feeling after the implementing Zoom or other e-learning platforms in your subject courses? How difficult was the full transition to remote processes?

9. In your opinion, how effective is journalism online teaching?

10. Anyway, what are the advantages of online learning?

11. Anyway, what are the difficulties and what is the biggest challenge of online learning?

12. In your opinion, what opportunities does online learning pose? After the end of pandemic would you like to use distance learning in your classes?

13. In your opinion, what appeared, what type of skills or knowledge do Georgian journalists lack? What would be desirable to include in your J-schools curricula?

Appendix 2

List of Media Educators

#	Interviewed Media Educators:	
1	International Black Sea University	Private University
2	International Black Sea University	Private University
3	Caucasian University	Private University
4	GIPA/ Georgian Institute of Public Affairs	Private University
5	TSU/ Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	State University
6	TSU/ Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	State University
7	GRUNI/ Grigol Robakidze University	Private University
8	ILIAUNI/Ilia State University	State University
9	SEU/Georgian National University	Private University
10	SEU/Georgian National University	Private University
11	Alte University	Private University
12	Gori University	State University
13	Caucasian International University	Private University
14	Georgian Technical University	State University
15	SDASU/David Aghmashenebeli University	Private University
16	ATSU/ Kutaisi Akaki Tsereteli University	State University
17	ATSU/ Kutaisi Akaki Tsereteli University	State University